

October 13, 2009

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
Secretary of State
2201 C St NW Ste 7276
Washington DC 20520

Dear Madam Secretary:

As the United States and other world powers pursue talks with Iran over its nuclear program, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) concludes that it is vitally important that Iran be called to account for its deplorable human rights record, including egregious violations of religious freedom. Four months after the Iranian government's shameful repression of freedom of expression, brutal and unjustified acts of violence against innocent individuals, and sham criminal prosecutions in connection with the June elections, the United States must signal during the current talks its unwavering support for human rights for all Iranians and insist that Iran honor its international obligations on religious freedom. While we were pleased to learn that the U.S. delegation raised some human rights issues on the sidelines of the October 1 negotiations, we believe that human rights and religious freedom concerns, beyond the status of American detainees, must be an integral part of the ongoing talks.

Over the years, the Iranian government has engaged in prolonged detention, torture, and executions of its citizens based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. The government also has imposed harsh prison sentences on many prominent activists, clerics, journalists, and dissidents in the Shi'a majority community who have advocated for reform. Many have been tried under criminal laws on trumped-up charges of "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that deviate from Islamic standards.

The Iranian government's systematic repression extends beyond the Shi'a majority to target religious minorities, particularly Baha'is, as well as Sufi Muslims, Jews, and Evangelical Christians. In the past year, the Iranian government has intensified its targeting of these groups while increasing its anti-Semitic, Holocaust-denying rhetoric. The Iranian government also has taken steps toward passing a revised penal code that, in clear violation of Iran's international legal obligations, would codify draconian punishments, including the death penalty, on converts from Islam.

Since 1999, the State Department repeatedly has designated Iran a "Country of Particular Concern," or CPC, due to its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. In its 2009 Annual Report, USCIRF found that religious freedom conditions continue to deteriorate. As a CPC, Iran is subject to Presidential Actions, including economic sanctions, under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). Despite being designated a CPC for 10 years, no IRFA-related sanction has been imposed on Iran because of existing sanctions. USCIRF believes that the rapidly deteriorating conditions for religious freedom justify that at long last Presidential Actions be taken. USCIRF therefore urges you first to fulfill the statutory requirement under IRFA Section 402b(2) of identifying Iranian government agencies and

officials responsible for particularly severe violations of religious freedom and then take the following “commensurate actions” under IRFA Section 405:

- Bar from entry into the United States and freeze the assets of Iranian government officials who have engaged in particularly severe religious freedom violations; and
- Work with our European allies also to ban from entry and freeze the assets of Iranian officials who have engaged in particularly severe religious freedom violations.

Such actions would send an unambiguous message to the Iranian government of the need for demonstrable actions that would end 30 years of repression, and another message of solidarity to the Iranian people that the U.S. government is concerned about human rights and religious freedom abuses in Iran.

Sincerely yours,
Leonard Leo